



# Identifying Historical Context by Kylene Beers

Not too long ago, an apple was something you ate, surfing required a board, a web was home to a spider, and a virus infected a human body. Now, though, when people say they have an Apple, spent the afternoon surfing, are still amazed at the Web, or have a virus, there can be some confusion! Words mean different things at different times. Additionally, views on human rights and particular practices change over time. As you read, especially as you read a text written in another time, understanding the **historical context** will help you reach valid conclusions about the text.

When you read a novel or an autobiography, how do you know when it takes place? In literature, the time period is a very important part of the setting. Think about current events and ideas that shape your world, such as political and ideological issues, environmental concerns, or new technology. All of these have an impact on your life. If you were to write your own autobiography, current events would probably make their way into your writing.

Frequently, dialogue serves to indicate the time period in which a work of literature takes place. Archaic language and antiquated grammar tell a reader that a piece was written a long time ago. Often literature will contain slang terms that capture the flavor of a particular time and place.

Read the following excerpt from Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Which details give you clues about the time period?

I used to take a seat on top of the gatepost and watch the world go by. One way to Orlando ran past my house, so the carriages and cars would pass before me. The movement made me glad to see it. Often the white travelers would hail me, but more often I hailed them, and asked, "Don't you want me to go a piece of the way with you?"

The reference to carriages and cars tells you that this selection takes place at a time when one could see both carriages and cars on a road. The road appears to be a country road, not a highway, which runs past the narrator's house. These details suggest a time around the early part of the twentieth century. The narrator's request to go "a piece of the way," meaning "a short distance," is rural Southern dialect, which establishes the setting for the narrative.

Read the following excerpt from the same text, and pay special attention to the last sentence.

I'd ride up the road for perhaps a half-mile, then walk back. I did not do this with the permission of my parents, nor with their foreknowledge. When they found out about it later, I usually got a whipping. My grandmother worried about my forward ways a great deal. She had known slavery and to her my brazenness was unthinkable.

This passage gives you a clue to the period Hurston is writing about. Her grandmother who "had known slavery" is still alive. This detail sets the narrative several decades after emancipation.

## Your Turn

Read the rest of the selection from *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Why is the historical period important to Hurston's writing? How did the social, political, and racial issues of the time affect Hurston's childhood?

